**Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: November Readings**

**November 4th: Ecclesiasticus 38: 1-34: Host David, Lead Toyin.** Doctors (and Pharmacists) and Medicine. Mourning for the Dead. A list of Craftsmen. The author struggles a bit with his theology here. The orthodox Jewish starting point is that God gives sickness and God gives health, and sickness goes with bad behaviour and wellness with good behaviour. If this is the whole truth, then doctors and medicine are interfering with God in action. The disciples ask Jesus who had done the sinning, when they encounter sickness/disability. They are taken aback when Jesus tries to disabuse them of this notion by pointing out the obvious: that people who have a bad time are not self-evidently bad people who “deserve” to suffer. The absolute doctrine is clearly not tenable. For example, mother rescues small child from thorn bush: Child is hurt (Innocently), Mother is hurt (innocently): God is not going to be angry with the Father doing some first aid!!! This is before you consider children being born with disabilities....before they have had any opportunity to sin. Then there are e.g. plants with healing properties. Surely God meant us to use them? (We now know that some animals use natural remedies.)

So, “sin and suffer” shifts to God inspiring doctors: to treat, and, in due course, to prevent illness. But the “sin and suffer” approach isn’t just ancient weird. Vaccination against HIV has been seen as encouraging sexual irresponsibility. How much alcohol rehab (and how many liver transplants) do we fund for the persistent drinker? Would St George’s want to host a safe injection space for drug addicts?

Critics see Hospital Chaplains as science pandering to superstition. How would you respond?

“Don’t kill yourself by over-doing the mourning” sounds a bit harsh. Though e.g. Miss Faversham gave up life by living on as only a mourner. Formal mourning can be helpful, but I suggest we always need to recognise that there is no such thing as standard grief: it is highly personal. It is interesting that the “no heaven to look forward to” author yet again says life isn’t worth living if you don’t have health and money.

The craftsmen section stops short of dissing the manual crafts. He recognises that we c could not do without them. But he is clear that they are not top people, and that they are too busy thinking about their hands to use their brains fully. Not all his contemporaries agreed with BS on this. Churchill was statesman, writer, artist and brick layer. Jesus was carpenter and..... Schools try to get their students to follow a balanced curriculum. Where do you stand on this?

**November 11th: Ecclesiasticus 39: 1-35: Host David, Lead David.** Portrait of an ideal Wise Man. Creation Hymn. Prayer, study, travel, experience, intelligence. This is a sort of top person wise man, with an emphasis on command of language. He (assumed he) is listened to by rulers. I’m not sure how far this includes the prophets: who tended to be outsiders! You wonder how someone gets into this wise person category. If you are not a privileged insider, can your wisdom be heard? Are there wise people who are not good with words? However, you do need to work (and pray) at being wise.

The creation hymn is interesting. As usual, the good for the good, evil for the evil stuff is not altogether convincing. How do you rate verse 26? Would you have the same list? The author tells people not to ask awkward questions. I’d challenge that. You get value from asking awkward questions.

**November 18th: Ecclesiasticus 40: 1-30: Host David. Lead Brian.** On men’s common lot. On increased suffering for sinners. A series of comparisons. On a beggar’s life. A very pessimistic view of ordinary life. It really doesn’t sound as if God is looking after us. If this was what you turned to when looking for Bible guidance on the meaning of life...... It reminds you of the “nasty, brutish and short” summary. Interestingly, a lot of the unpleasantness is more or less self-inflicted. You don’t HAVE TO BE angry, jealous, guilty, involved in rivalry. Worry and perplexity are less a matter of choice, but, sometimes at least, there is a way out of these. Do most people actually spend a lot of time worrying about death? Are some people just determined to be miserable: “OK I won the lottery, but now I’m really worried about being responsible for all that money.” Yes the weather forecast is great, but that doesn’t mean it is right.” “The doctor says I’m fine, but he may have missed something.”

Do the wicked suffer more, and are they more likely to suffer. (Remember the author thinks everyone is having a bad time!) Death, plague, famine, etc, really don’t by-pass the virtuous either in incidence or in severity. I like the idea of goodness being longer lasting and better remembered; but I’m not absolutely sure it’s true. (Though it is true that you seldom hear bad things said about someone at a funeral – “eulogy” means good report.) The Flood (obviously a non-selective disaster) was justified by the idea that only Noah and family were good people. That does seem rather improbable.

The series of comparisons is interesting. It would be interesting to take a vote on 18 to 24. The fear of the Lord does trump everything else, in the sense that if you are at peace with your Maker, everything else sort of falls into place. But the lack nothing promise is not a guarantee that e.g. the believer will never miss out on a meal.

It can be unpleasant having to ask someone else for money or food or hospitality, or indeed time; but children have to do that, and sometimes at the end of life the old person has to ask the children. Food Banks? There is a challenge for the person being asked to respond in a way that doesn’t make the “beggar” feel awful. Slightly odd that giving alms comes highly recommended in most religions, but asking for alms is here seen as shameful. Don’t judge the beggar without knowing the story. PS entrepreneurs have to beg loans to get started. Mendicant (Religious) Orders are not condemned.

**November 25th: Ecclesiasticus 41: 1-24, 42: 1-14: Host Toyin, Lead Evan.** Death. Curses for the sinner. Things to be ashamed of. Things not to be ashamed of. Disciplining daughters. Death is of course a universal reality. I’m not wholly convinced by the rather simplistic: doing very nicely = don’t want to die, not doing very well = want to die. “There will be no questions asked in the grave” is an intriguing phrase. The belief that life is not the end has various aspects – of different importance to different people. They include: The eternity of the God from whom our lives stem; the sense of incompleteness in this life (which is odd if death is the “natural” end); some people’s experience of maintaining contact with those who have died; near death experiences; the scientific sense of matter being in some sense eternal.

The sinner’s curse section hints at inherited sin. You can see why this is believed, but children do not necessarily inherit their parents’ crimes, nor do once criminals inevitably become always criminals.

Verse 15 is very true! The things to be ashamed of list makes good sense. I’m inclined to add making a promise and not keeping it. I guess many of us have been there. We may want to question some of the not to be ashamed of list!

As regards the daughters section.....oh dear. Particularly uncomfortable is the emphasis not on the welfare of the daughter but on the reputation of the father.